

DIPLOMATIC LEADERSHIP IN TIMES OF INTERNATIONAL CRISIS: THE MAVERICK, THE CONGREGATOR AND THE PRAGMATIST

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Does it make sense to talk about leadership in the context of international diplomacy? After all, diplomacy is a tightly scripted profession, which strives on diplomats closely following bureaucratic protocols, artfully reinforcing tacit conventions and scrupulously subscribing to international legal norms. As Neumann points out, to be a diplomat, is essentially a matter of juggling different scripts that are being constantly thrown upon oneself by one's diplomatic responsibilities and encounters.¹ If leadership is to be understood as a way of "providing solutions to common problems [...] and mobilizing the energies of others to follow these courses of action",² then diplomacy is probably not a good place to look for individuals capable of inspiring and mobilizing others for collective purposes. That being said, we should also be careful not to exclusively associate diplomacy with a rule-following process driven by institutional pressure and political self-effacement. The Renaissance humanist tradition from which modern diplomacy draws much of its form and substance³ also prized a reflexive mode of knowledge production that embraced "the incredulity toward certainties, boxed thinking, and exclusive ways of doing things".⁴ In other words, to be a diplomatic subject is not only about reproducing rules and conventions, but also about reflecting upon how "to reconcile the assertion of political will by independent entities with [...] the 'empire of circumstances'

¹ I. B. Neumann, "To Be a Diplomat," *International Studies Perspectives* 6(2005).

² Nannerl O. Keohane, *Thinking About Leadership* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010) : 19.

³ Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1988).

⁴ C. M. Constantinou, "Between Statecraft and Humanism: Diplomacy and Its Forms of Knowledge," *International Studies Review* 15, no. 2 (2013) : 157.

around them”.⁵

While the rule-following mode of diplomatic conduct may take precedence in the day-to-day management of diplomatic relations, the reflexive mode shifts into high-gear especially in time of international crises, when the “empire of circumstances” grows unruly. Perceptions of unanticipated threats to important values⁶ trigger abrupt disruptions of diplomatic relations⁷ and forces parties to revisit, amend and even to call into question the very basis of their relationship.⁸ It is exactly the entropy generated by international crises that creates the demand for leadership. Established procedures, practices and rules of diplomatic management suddenly lose relevance in a proportional manner to the intensity of the international crisis. A reflexive quest for solutions is thus set in motion, which in turn opens up opportunities for discerning diplomats to take on a leadership role by providing a sense of direction for action, mobilizing fellowship and managing tensions. The argument I advance in this contribution is that international crises enable three distinct profiles of diplomatic leaders: the *maverick*, the *congregator* and the *pragmatist*. What the three profiles have in common is a proclivity for resisting institutional pressure, challenging well-held assumptions, and for “going against the grain”. At the same time, they differ on their ability to build support for their action plans. The *maverick* offers strong ideas about how to handle the crisis, but she fails to inspire many others to follow her. The *congregator* is a consensus-builder. He rarely sets out a powerful vision for others to rally around and instead seeks to bridge differences among parties. Finally, the *pragmatist* combines a bold vision for taking control of the situation with a mutually resonating relationship with her audience.

⁵ Adam Watson, *Diplomacy : The Dialogue between States* (London: Methuen, 1984): 15.

⁶ Ole R. Holsti, *Crisis, Escalation, War* (Montreal,: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1972).

⁷ Michele Acuto, "Diplomats in Crisis," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 22, no. 3 (2011).

⁸ Corneliu Bjola, "Enmity and Friendship in World Politics: A Diplomatic Approach," *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 8, no. 2 (2013).

The U.S. Ambassador to Berlin from 1933 to 1937, William E. Dodd, encapsulates well the maverick profile. A former academic historian at the University of Chicago and a staunch supporter of Wilsonian internationalism, Dodd was appointed by President Roosevelt to serve as a living sermon of democracy in a country that had just turned away from it.⁹ To be sure, Dodd took up his post in Berlin in 1933 with an open mind to negotiation with the new German government, but he soon realised that all that Hitler had in mind was “the old German idea of dominating Europe through warfare”.¹⁰ Key to his grasping of the impending crisis was the complacency he noted, both domestically and internationally, to Hitler’s repressive policies at home and aggressive initiatives abroad. He continuously tried to impress upon the State Department the need for a change of course, but his pleas fell on deaf if not hostile ears.¹¹ Almost in desperation, he took the matter in his own hands. Despite the intense pressure applied by the German government, Dodd refused to attend the annual Nazi party meetings in Nuremberg in an attempt to deny Hitler public recognition and to symbolically distance his country from the Nazi regime. He also convinced the British and French ambassadors to boycott the Nazi rally for four years in a row, but by 1937 he ended up being overruled by his own superiors in Washington.¹² Dodd’s failure to build stronger support for a vigorous collective response to Nazi foreign policy had, of course, multiple causes, most notably the reluctance of the great powers of the day, including the U.S., to confront Germany. Dodd’s example is nevertheless important because it illustrates the fact that diplomats do have options even in seemingly impossible situations. Rule-following cannot account for Dodd’s actions. It was his reflective attitude against boxed thinking that made the difference, and which come at

⁹ Franklin L. Ford, "Three Observers in Berlin: Rumbold, Dodd, and François-Poncet," in *The Diplomats, 1919-1939*, ed. Gordon Alexander Craig and Felix Gilbert (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994): 448.

¹⁰ cited in Arnold A. Offner, "William E. Dodd: Romantic Historian and Diplomatic Cassandra," *Historian* 24, no. 4 (1962): 456.

¹¹ Ford, "Three Observers in Berlin: Rumbold, Dodd, and François-Poncet," 452.

¹² Offner, "William E. Dodd: Romantic Historian and Diplomatic Cassandra," 466.

a great personal price for his career and health.

Javier Solana might have started as a maverick when, as a young Spanish politician he strongly opposed Spain's membership in NATO, but he gradually grew to become a first class "congregator" diplomat, first as the NATO Secretary General between 1995-1999, and subsequently as the European Union's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy between 1999-2009. For space reasons, I will only focus on his NATO tenure. Solana's honed his leadership skills during the difficult negotiations leading up to NATO enlargement in 1997, but his "congregator" style fully bloomed during the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo. His diplomatic efforts prior and during the Kosovo crisis were not informed by a particular vision concerning NATO's role in the post-Cold war period, but by his commitment to maintaining cohesion between allies. When disagreements surfaced, he creatively handled them as an "honest broker" behind closed doors and made sure controversies were kept in check.¹³ His efforts paid off, first by almost single-handling convincing NATO ambassadors that NATO had "sufficient legal basis" to taking military action without explicit UN approval and second by skilfully keeping the Alliance together during the difficult moments of the air campaign against Serbia.¹⁴ While Dodd's example highlights the need for diplomatic leaders to have the courage of their opinions, Solana's congregational style speaks to a different important quality: the ability to bridge differences by listening carefully to all parties, identifying the most feasible common ground, and by negotiating a broadly supported course of action. By their very nature, international crises are prone to divide actors including close allies. The congregator power is therefore an essential, albeit rare quality of diplomatic leaders. It stems not from rule-following, but from the leader's astuteness to anticipate obstacles and

¹³ Ryan C. Hendrickson, *Diplomacy and War at Nato : The Secretary General and Military Action after the Cold War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006): 98.

¹⁴ Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly : Nato's War to Save Kosovo* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000) : 45, 139.

her creative ability to bring sides together.

The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, has been often described as a pragmatic diplomat, guided mainly by results not by ideological or moral considerations.¹⁵ Although his shocking support for the Russian aggressive policy towards Ukraine¹⁶ critically challenges his pragmatic credentials and diplomatic reputation, Lavrov generally approaches foreign affairs with a strategic compass, by which he means that diplomats should always “turn the head away from one point on the map and take a look at [the] whole region”.¹⁷ These attributes do not necessary qualify Lavrov as a diplomatic leader, as strategic pragmatism is susceptible to cultivating a rather mixed and weakly committed group of followers. However, the Syrian crisis in Sept 2013 created for Lavrov a great opportunity to put his strategic pragmatism to work in a way that allowed him to take control of the situation and convince other key players to follow him. As the U.S. was preparing to launch an air strike against Syria in retaliation for the breach of the “red line” against the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, Lavrov successfully exploited a rare diplomatic opportunity that helped mend tensions and defuse the crisis. According to an early press interpretation, an off-hand comment made by the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, at a London press conference about President Assad turning over “every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community” in order to avoid a military strike on his country, was immediately seized by Lavrov and deftly pushed through the UN diplomatic channels.¹⁸ Within days, Lavrov managed to craft a plan together

¹⁵ Susan B. Glasser, "'The Law of Politics' According to Sergei Lavrov " *Foreign Policy*, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/04/29/the_law_of_politics_according_to_sergei_lavrov_russia#sthash.rBq2tfiT.dpbs.

¹⁶ Simon Tisdall and Rory Carroll, "Russia Sets Terms for Ukraine Deal as 40,000 Troops Mass on Border," *Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/31/russia-ukraine-deal-troops-lavrov-kerry>.

¹⁷ Sergey Lavrov, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Interview in the "Sunday Evening with Vladimir Solovyev" Program on "Russia" Tv Channel," http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/670212761e9e1b4b44257b14003fd429!OpenDocument.

¹⁸ RT News, "Russia Urges Syria Hand over Chemical Weapons to Intl Control to Avoid Strike," <http://rt.com/news/lavrov-syria-chemical-weapons-handover-615/>.

with Kerry for dismantling the Syrian chemical arsenal and to pass a UN Security Council resolution to that effect.¹⁹ The reluctance of President Obama to engage his country in another military conflict in the Middle East undoubtedly contributed to Kerry's positive response to Lavrov's initiative. The latter should be nevertheless be given due credit for pushing the diplomatic proposal at the right time, in an appropriate format and through the relevant diplomatic channels. Similar to Dodd and Solana's cases, rule-following played little role in Lavrov's diplomatic success. What mattered was his ability to creatively identify an opportunity for mending tensions and to competently pursue it.

The three examples of diplomatic leadership discussed above tell an interesting story. The concept of diplomatic leadership is neither analytically meaningless nor practically irrelevant. Despite the dense environment of rules, conventions and norms in which they conduct their business, diplomats are not passive rule-followers. They do have the capacity to inspire and mobilize people in support of collective projects but it is up to them to demonstrate they have the necessary skills to do that. It is especially in times of international crises, when the established rules of diplomatic engagement are being challenged, that these qualities sharply emerge into view. The maverick, the congregator and the pragmatist speak to different modes of exercising diplomatic leadership, but what is particularly important about them is that they require diplomats to take risks, think creatively and adapt swiftly to changing circumstances.

¹⁹ Pamela Falk, "Syria Deal: What Is in the Kerry-Lavrov Agreement," *CBS News*, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/syria-deal-what-is-in-the-kerry-lavrov-agreement/>.